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# Henry Clay Dean

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## Henry Clay Dean

Born of middle class parents in Fayette County, Pennsylvania, on October 27, 1822, Henry Clay Dean became one of the historic characters of early Iowa. Comparatively little is known about his ancestry except that his people were of English descent. One of his forebears, Henry Dean, was Archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Henry VIII, and some of his mother's ancestors appear to have been among the colonists who emigrated to America with Lord Baltimore.

Henry Clay Dean's later career was no doubt greatly influenced by his early training. What man's is not? He attended the common schools of the neighborhood and later graduated from Madison College in his native State. For a time he worked at the stone mason's trade learned from his father, taught school, kept books for a prominent iron manufacturer for his board and the privilege



of using his employer's library wherein he studied both theology and law. He was later ordained a minister in the Methodist Church and admitted to the bar.

Perhaps it was the outcropping of an ancestral trait that Henry Clay Dean should have a bent for religion. At any rate soon after his ordination he was assigned to a circuit in the Virginia conference where he labored for several years — incidentally making for himself a name as a pulpit orator.

In 1847 he married Christiana Margaret Haigler of Randolph County, Virginia, and three years later came to Iowa, locating temporarily at Pittsburg on the Des Moines River in Van Buren County. During his early years in Iowa he moved from place to place — a typical Methodist clergyman — living for a time in Keosauqua, Muscatine, Middletown, West Point, and finally in Mount Pleasant where he resided until 1871 when he left the State.

Beginning with his apprenticeship on the Virginia circuit Henry Clay Dean's fame as an orator preceded him wherever he went. One of his contemporaries, Edward H. Stiles, referred to him as "the finest natural orator" he had ever heard. He was said to be "deeply learned", drawing "his inspiration from the richest sources of history and the classics." During his ministry in Virginia he once visited Washington. While there he asked permission to preach in one of the churches of the capital city — only to be refused by the minister in charge,



perhaps on account of his odd and somewhat uncouth appearance. Finally, having secured the use of an old church, he held the service and when the hour arrived "the dilapidated building" was filled to the extent of its capacity by the "largest assemblage of congressmen, senators, heads of departments, and leading citizens that had ever greeted a minister of the gospel in Washington City."

As a minister he appears to have been of the evangelistic type. An admirer tells of his holding meetings in an old courthouse "where sinners were nightly melted like old pewter and run up into christians bright and new." He must have been able to put his own strength of character into his appeals for he could win any kind of an audience, and his "eloquent and earnest appeals brought many into the fold of the church."

His career as a preacher was greatly influenced by the sectional division in the Methodist Church in 1844. Although he took his calling very seriously he thought more of the nation. This separation of the church into its distinct northern and southern branches he opposed with all his power for he considered it to be the first step in the dissolution of the Union—a course that could not fail to end in civil war. Feeling that an affiliation with either faction would appear to be sanction of the schism he finally retired from the pulpit.

After his retirement from the ministry Henry Clay Dean turned his allegiance to that most "jeal-



ous mistress" the law — a profession he followed until his death. His experience in persuasive oratory stood him in good stead and by sheer force of eloquence and his extraordinary personality, he "carried everything before him." Because of his oratorical ability and particularly his influence with a jury, he was frequently employed by the defense in some of the most important capital cases of the Middle West. "His arguments were ingenious and his eloquence unapproachable. He reached the hearts of jurors" and by his pleading "would melt the court to tears and win the sympathy of the audience."

As a jury lawyer Mr. Dean was not interested in the details and technicalities of the law, but as an advocate of the great fundamental principles of right and justice he had few equals. It has been estimated that no attorney in Iowa had in his day saved more men from the penitentiary or from execution.

One such case was that of the State of Iowa *vs.* Q. D. Whitman tried in the district court of Union County in 1875. Dean, being retained for the defense, made a masterly plea for justice and humanity. To combat the indictment of murder in the first degree the previous good character of the defendant, the reliability of his witnesses, the total lack of premeditation before the commission of the crime, and the hereditary taint of insanity in the accused were all marshalled before the court and the jury. Al-



though Whitman was convicted he was given a sentence of but seven years in the penitentiary at Fort Madison and was pardoned after serving about two years.

Dean's closing words to the jury indicate in a measure the force of his arguments. "It is urged that crime is greatly on the increase. This then is the greater reason why the State should not become the greater criminal in the inhuman punishment of an insane, helpless citizen. It is urged that courts have become inefficient. Then is this the greater reason that they should be just, and justice cannot inflict punishment upon insanity. It has been given out that mobs will deal death where juries refuse to inflict unjust punishment. To the wild beasts who make up mobs let all cruelty, all crime, all violence, be committed until the State may be able to assert her authority. But the dignity of the State, the purity of courts, the justice and supremacy of the law, must be asserted as the only hope of civilization, the only possible arrest of crime and the spirit of violence from whence it springs."

According to one authority Dean's greatest success at the bar "was achieved about the year 1867, when he saved the neck" of a man by the name of Trogdon who had without doubt committed one of the most brutal murders in Wapello County. "Dean set up the plea of imbecility" and was successful in securing "a sentence of life imprisonment"—thus cheating the gallows. In the course of his argument



to the jury Dean "exhibited the prisoner's head", dwelling upon its peculiar formation. Suddenly pointing to the head of the murderer, he exclaimed "A defect! A defect! A defect!" in such a fashion as to convince the jury that "the prisoner was not a responsible being." Dean's triumph was complete — his oratory carried the day. Even rather prejudiced observers agree that while he was not a great lawyer he was "unique, original, and sometimes spoke as if he were inspired."

Henry Clay Dean possessed a lifelong interest in government and politics. As a campaigner he is said to have had few equals. Being a speaker of extraordinary talent and having an uncanny ability to remember people whom he had met, his services were much in demand during political contests. Indeed, it is claimed that he participated in every campaign from 1838 to 1887. Even his duties as a minister appeared to be no deterrent in this regard.

Shortly after coming to Iowa, he attended the Annual Methodist Conference which was held in Dubuque, the home of George Wallace Jones, then Democratic Senator from Iowa. While there he was entertained at the home of the Senator where Mrs. Jones's bounteous table delighted the minister who was "an enormous eater". During the conference the Know Nothings were very zealous in enlisting the support of the assembled clergy and Dean, among others, was elected to membership. The information was brought him by a fellow minister



with the suggestion that inasmuch as Mr. Jones was a Catholic it would be improper to be his guest any longer. Dean became highly indignant, denouncing Know Nothingism in "most uncompromising terms". Naturally this attitude pleased Senator Jones who induced Dean to preach a sermon the following Sunday condemning the secret order. It is needless to say that the orator of the day was never "initiated" into the organization.

After this episode Henry Clay Dean not only became an ardent Democrat but an untiring opponent of the Know Nothings for whom he felt a bitter hatred. Dean was primarily a man of action and so anxious was he to be instrumental in bringing defeat to his newly acquired enemy that he joined the supporters of Henry A. Wise, the Democratic candidate for the Governorship of Virginia who was being opposed by the Know Nothings. Thus, armed with letters of recommendation from Senator Jones and other influential Iowa Democrats, Dean hastened to the scene of the contest. And from subsequent events it may be inferred that the Democratic candidate considered his success in the campaign due in some measure to the efforts of the Iowan.

What may be considered a sequel to this affair occurred on December 4, 1855, when Henry Clay Dean was elected Chaplain of the United States Senate for the first session of the Thirty-fourth Congress. It appears that Senator Jones had remarked to a friend upon the occasion of Dean's



attendance at the Methodist Conference in Dubuque that he "would have Mr. Dean made Chaplain"—a promise which subsequent events saw fulfilled with the assistance of Senator A. C. Dodge and the Virginia delegation who were friends of Governor Wise. The acquaintance between George W. Jones and Henry Clay Dean became a lifelong friendship—a friendship the more interesting in view of the antipodal ideas which they held in regard to personal appearance, for Jones was fastidious in dress while Dean went to the very opposite extreme.

As a lecturer Dean "was among the ablest and most popular of his day." Having ability to speak on a variety of subjects, he seems to have been known especially for his "Mistakes of Ingersoll", "The Constitution", "The Declaration of Independence", and "The Extension of Popular Suffrage". His patriotism and devotion to the Union was intense and although an opponent of secession he "did not favor coercion as the best means" of settling the difficulty. In 1860 he favored Stephen A. Douglas, the candidate of the northern wing of the Democratic party, for the Presidency, and in his behalf "he made the most eloquent and earnest appeals of his life."

His attitude toward the Union leaders before and during the Civil War caused him much serious trouble, for he was mobbed, imprisoned without civil trial, and subjected to considerable verbal persecution. He was outspoken in his criticism of Stanton,



Seward, and even Lincoln in their policy of coercion — a practice which caused him to be denounced as a traitor. Active criticism of the administration during war time, especially if the critic be of the opposite party, is a dangerous pastime; but when one resorts to open ridicule, as Dean did in describing "the bloodless battle of Croton" and in belittling the conduct of the Home Guards, mob spirit is very apt to be turned loose.

As a result of these caustic and unwise remarks Dean had an opportunity to learn at first hand the lengths to which public passion may lead men. During the month of May, 1863, while on a journey from Quincy, Illinois, to Keosauqua to attend a meeting of the Democratic party, he had occasion to pass through Keokuk. It was at a time when public passions were inflamed and mob spirit was rife. The Keokuk *Gate City*, a Republican newspaper, was demanding his arrest, and according to his own version of the affair "nearly every Puritan paper in the State had joined in the general howl". While he was visiting with T. W. Clagett, a Democrat who voiced the opposition to the war as editor of *The Constitution*, he was seized by a mob of about a hundred soldiers and citizens, arrested, and turned over "to the Sergeant of the Provost Guard."

That Dean was mistreated subsequent to his arrest there can be little doubt. He was threatened with death in various ways — a typical display of mob spirit — reviled, searched, stripped, taunted,



tormented, and imprisoned in the common guard house. In his book on *Crimes of the Civil War* Dean graphically described his experiences. On being placed under lock and key he was informed "that the central idea of a military prison was to make it as nearly the very essence of hell as was possible. In this they made a capital success." The room used for the military prison, according to this account, "was about sixteen feet wide by forty-five feet long, with enough taken off the side to make room for a flight of stairs."

In this room the more permanent personnel consisted of some fifty men "of almost every conceivable grade, gathered from every rank of society, and charged with every manner of offence known to the laws of God and man." As may have been expected some of them "even in sickness" were "lawless and ungovernable". Then, to "add to the interest of this society", every evening the patrol "would gather up the beastly drunk and tumble them in." Here Mr. Dean was kept for "fourteen long and loathesome dreary days and nights" before being "unconditionally released".

Partly as an outgrowth of his persecution — for such it was, since practically all who knew him well vouch for his loyalty to the Union — Henry Clay Dean undertook to collect data and compile a book entitled the *Crimes of the Civil War*. One volume of five hundred and thirty-nine pages was published in 1869. Further treatment was contem-



plated in a second volume but the manuscript was destroyed when his entire library of four thousand volumes burned. The book was written in a partisan spirit and shows an intensity of feeling that is rather remarkable, particularly in a man whose training had been to "turn the other cheek". In later years, however, he appears to have regretted the publication for he once expressed the wish that every volume could be consigned to the flames.

Mr. Dean and his family left Iowa in 1871, taking up their residence in Putnam County, Missouri, just across the line from Centerville, where he had purchased about eight hundred acres of land which he called "Rebel Cove". There he spent his last years "reading and writing", with occasional public appearances, defending some alleged criminal in the courts or making addresses.

One such public address was delivered before the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa City on June 29, 1874. It was the occasion of the seventeenth annual meeting of the Society and the subject of his discourse was "The Philosophy of the History of the Louisiana Purchase"—a superb oration rich in historical allusion and powerful in diction. The closing paragraphs when read fifty years later reveal something of the man.

"I am not old — yet I am older than the railroad and magnetic telegraph; older than your state. I have seen but little, yet I have seen the triumph of the republic system in America — it will yet triumph



in Europe. I have heard evil prophecies of the government, and each party and statesman is restive lest the government should die with him. . . .

“I have seen statesmen, soldiers, philosophers, and public leaders swept down like leaves in a burning forest, yet the republic still lives, outliving them all. For more than half a hundred years I’ve seen yon sun rise over the mountain forests, pass through floating clouds, and bathe his golden plumage in the mists of the ocean.

“Each year rising upon lands more beautifully adorned, a people more thoroughly enlightened and more jealous of their liberty, science more carefully studied and more thoroughly understood, each year expanding the area of liberty and extending the lines of free thought. Centuries may he travel in his course, but he will never set upon the rights of man or outlive the government of God, which is pledged to justice, truth and liberty.”

Later, in 1885, Dean was asked to speak at the meeting of the Tri-State Old Settlers’ Association held in Keokuk. There at the gathering of his contemporaries from the States of Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa; there in the city where he had suffered his greatest humiliation he responded to the toast “The Pioneer Preachers”. These vanguards of civilization, he declared, “have done more than all the politicians to reform the people. It was the churches, not political parties, that abolished slavery. The pioneer preachers did the work.”



That he should have been asked to speak at such a gathering appears remarkable, particularly if credence be given to the accounts of his activities during the Civil War in which he had been reviled in every way known to partisan journalists during a period when "force" rather than "elegance" determined epithets. But no reference to former experiences, which no doubt a visit to Keokuk brought to mind, marred his speech. Indeed, in the calm of his later years, there must have been much of regret for the misunderstanding kindled by his attitude and activity during the Civil War.

Henry Clay Dean died at his home, "Rebel Cove", on February 6, 1887, survived by his wife and seven children. On that day a picturesque character — a character unique in the annals of the church, the law, politics, and oratory — was lost to Pennsylvania the State of his birth, to Virginia the home of his apprenticeship, to Iowa his battlefield, and to Missouri his final resting place. Indeed, if devotion to a cause be a proper measure of a man's service, then Henry Clay Dean belonged to the whole Union, for the hope and prayer of his life was that there might be "No North, no South".

GEO. F. ROBESON